

Indiana University - Purdue University Fort Wayne Opus: Research & Creativity at IPFW

Organizational Leadership and Supervision Faculty
Publications

Division of Organizational Leadership and
Supervision

12-2016

The King of Kong: A Fistful of Quarters

Gordon B. Schmidt

Indiana University - Purdue University Fort Wayne, schmidtg@ipfw.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://opus.ipfw.edu/ols_facpubs



Part of the [Industrial and Organizational Psychology Commons](#), and the [Organizational Behavior and Theory Commons](#)

Opus Citation

Gordon B. Schmidt (2016). The King of Kong: A Fistful of Quarters. *Journal of Management Education*.39 (6), 801-811. Sage.
http://opus.ipfw.edu/ols_facpubs/90

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Division of Organizational Leadership and Supervision at Opus: Research & Creativity at IPFW. It has been accepted for inclusion in Organizational Leadership and Supervision Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Opus: Research & Creativity at IPFW. For more information, please contact admin@lib.ipfw.edu.

The King of Kong: A Fistful of Quarters

Journal of Management Education

2015, Vol. 39(6) 801–811

© The Author(s) 2015

Reprints and permissions:

sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/1052562915587584

jme.sagepub.com



Reviewed by: Gordon B. Schmidt, Indiana University Purdue University Fort Wayne, USA

Resource Description

The King of Kong: A Fistful of Quarters (2007, Picturehouse, 90 minutes) is a documentary that chronicles the attempt of Steve Wiebe to become recognized as the world record holder of the classic arcade game *Donkey Kong* (Cunningham & Gordon, 2007). Wiebe's attempts to be recognized are complicated by the fact that the current record holder is well respected and considered "a legend" by others players. The "legend" Billy Mitchell is treated much differently than the "outsider" Steve Wiebe. The movie offers an engaging example for students about issues of conflict, power, in-group bias, and fairness.

The movie begins by familiarizing viewers with the community of competitive classic arcade game players and Twin Galaxies, which tracks and verifies video game records. Individuals try to attain high scores on arcade games primarily from the 1980s and 1990s with much of the community players who started playing competitively when the games were new. Walter Day runs Twin Galaxies, acting as a referee for competitive arcade game record attempts and works with a team of volunteer referees verifying the scores set by players, usually sent in on video tape.

One player, Billy Mitchell, is recognized as the best classic arcade gamer of all time. Mitchell was the record holder at one time on several of the most well regarded arcade games and in 1999 was the first person to ever have a perfect game of the arcade game *Pac-man*. Many players talk about their admiration for Billy as a person and as a gamer, noting his general skill and cunning. Mitchell is still well connected with the classic arcade game community but is semiretired from competitive gaming. He owns his own hot wings restaurant. Mitchell's status as a success is emphasized throughout the film.

The film then introduces Steve Wiebe, a family man living in Redmond, Washington, who was recently laid off. While unemployed, he began to play *Donkey Kong* and tried to beat the world record held by Billy Mitchell. He studying the game seriously, modelling the patterns of game elements and

developing game strategies. He had never played competitively before and had no existing connection to Twin Galaxies. After countless hours of work, he finally beat the current world record and sent a video of his world record-breaking game to Twin Galaxies.

It is at this point that Steve begins to run into a problem. Billy Mitchell expresses concern that Steve could have cheated and faked the score, so Twin Galaxies sends people to look at Steve's *Donkey Kong* machine. While there is no real evidence or suggestion of cheating, Wiebe's score gets thrown out and Mitchell's high score is restored. The rest of the film follows Wiebe's attempts to regain the high score and face Billy Mitchell head to head in a game of *Donkey Kong*. Both of which prove difficult due to the classic arcade game communities partialness toward Mitchell and the refusal of Mitchell to respond to Wiebe directly.

Use in the Classroom

Video clips and films in particular have become increasingly recognized as a way to increase student learning and engagement (Billsberry, 2013; Champoux, 2001; Holbrook, 2009; Smith, 2009; Tyler, Anderson, & Tyler, 2009). Films are a way to cover the broad elements of a course (Holbrook, 2009), as well as a means to illustrate particular concepts that students may struggle with (Taylor & Provitera, 2011). The existing empirical evidence suggest that films and film clips help student engagement, course liking, and learning (Fee & Budde-Sung, 2014; Smith, 2009).

The King of Kong used in the classroom offers the potential to both illustrate broad constructs of a course and specific course concepts. I use *The King of Kong* for the undergraduate course Applied Leadership, which follows the general structure and focus of a Management Skills course. Management Skills courses have an applied focus on skills students can learn to be effective managers rather than the more traditional introductory management focus on management theories (Paglis, 2013; Whetten & Cameron, 2010).

The King of Kong illustrates many concepts related to management skills. The most basic nature of the film is about conflict, the conflict between Steve Wiebe and Billy Mitchell as well as the conflict of Wiebe with the established classic arcade game community. While Wiebe does not desire either conflict, to reach his goal of being the high scorer on *Donkey Kong* such conflict becomes inevitable. Students can be asked to recognize the conflicts in the film and think about how such conflict could be avoided or resolved by a leader. Within my class we distinguish between managers who hold positions with authority in an organization and leaders who can be any person that can influence other workers' attitudes and behavior. I ask students to examine

who has the potential to be a leader in the film as well as those who hold positions of authority (e.g., the head referee of Twin Galaxies Walter Day).

The question of fairness is central to the documentary's narrative focus. Billy Mitchell gets the benefit of the doubt from Twin Galaxies and the competitive classic arcade game community. Within the film the classic arcade game community seems to be blind to potential ethics questions about Mitchell's actions, as well as the potential double standard that exists between how Mitchell and Wiebe are treated. This lack of awareness also illustrates cognitive biases at the individual and community levels. It also illustrates reputational trust concepts as Mitchell's previous accomplishments and supportive community behaviors lead the gamers to trust him and his intentions. Students can reflect for themselves whether the differential treatment of Mitchell and Wiebe is "fair" given the context. I have students consider these points as part of an essay they write analyzing the movie.

The film illustrates well the impact of power on social relationships. Billy Mitchell's previous group accomplishments, charisma, and recognized skills give him significant power within the community of arcade game players. It is this power that helps him keep the upper hand over Wiebe and retain community support despite questionable and potentially unfair actions.

We also see in the film how power can be built. Instead of strenuously protesting the actions of Twin Galaxies that invalidate his score, Wiebe keeps putting in effort and showing up to events to try to beat the score. This makes Wiebe less of an outsider and gives the community a chance to see for themselves the level of skill and effort Wiebe brings to classic arcade games. While Wiebe does not look to gain power, his actions help build respect and potential power within the community. By the end of the film the community sees him less as an outsider and more as a potential contributor. Students can compare the influence tactics used by people in the film and how effective they are.

These issues can be examined in many different ways in assignments and exercises. For my course I use *The King of Kong* to tie together learning across several units. The course textbook is the 8th edition of *Developing Management Skills* by Whetten and Cameron (2010), and *The King of Kong* is shown after completion of the first seven book chapters, representing the first two parts of the book's organization. The film represents an example situation in which to apply the skills learned in both parts. After viewing the film in class, students analyze the film and apply class learning to film situations. Students identify the leadership issues within the documentary narrative and use their skill to describe how they, as a leader, could help resolve the problems.

Depending on class structure or focus, educators may want to use other assignments or activities with the film. I teach a 1 hour and 15 minute section, but longer classes might consider showing the film and having a guided

discussion afterwards about the issues raised in the documentary. The DVD version of the film has a number of extra features that could be shown at the same time as the film or shown before to prepare students for the film. They include more information about *Donkey Kong* and people in the documentary.

Applications from the movie could also be tested in exam items. Essay exam items could include situations with elements similar to the movie to see how well students can apply class discussions and analysis. The movie could also be used in a more evaluative way as a capstone movie for students to analyze. (For a good example of using a movie analysis in exam questions, please see Appendix B of Holbrook, 2009.)

Constructive Analysis and Comparison

As noted above, *The King of Kong* offers content that illustrates management-related concepts in a potentially interesting context. This is a major strength of using the film as it gives a medium for students to see class concepts play out in a real-world setting. Students can also analyze elements of the film and apply class-developed skills. Thus, the film can act in a way similar to a case study.

Despite this value, there are potential issues or weaknesses with use. One potential weakness is that some students might not perceive the film as directly related to workplace organizations. The competitive classic arcade gamer community is a hobby group more than a profit-making organization. As such, the teacher needs to make sure that students see how the events in the movie could apply to more traditional work organizations. The community has clear parallels to other organizations but an instructor may need to point them out for some students to see the applicability. Within my own class I used examples related to the movie earlier in the semester connecting it to class concepts learned. Guided class discussion after the film is shown could also be used to illustrate its applicability.

Another potential concern is that some students may not see the competitive classic arcade game community as a group similar to them. Related to that issue is that students uninterested in video games might see the movie topic as uninteresting. From my own experiences using the film, I have had students tell me that going into the film they did not think it would be interesting, but on watching the film, they did find it to be interesting and relevant to the class. There does seem to be a smaller group that does not see the connection, however. To reduce such issues, instructors can offer more context for the film or targeted questions that help students see the potential connections and applications. More traditional organizational examples could be given before the movie is screened or in discussion after it is shown to help alleviate such issues.

The King of Kong also could offer a good fit in a course where it is one of multiple movies shown. Smith (2009) offered a model in which multiple movies and clips were used as the major means of instruction in a course. *The King of Kong* could be used in such a context as an illustration of a particular concept, such as conflict and/or ethics. Within my Management Skills course, I show two movies. *The King of Kong* acts as an assignment where students can apply concepts from Parts 1 and 2 of the Whetten and Cameron (2010) textbook, and Part 3 is covered later in the semester by the film *Office Space*. Other instructors might want to add an assignment that compares the leadership issue similarities and difference between the two movies, although I did not ask that directly in the assignment I use. Other films could be used paired with or as a replacement for *The King of Kong*, with one potential example with a conflict and group dynamics focus—*Twelve Angry Men*.

Overall, *The King of Kong* illustrates important management concepts. As a film that many students have not seen before, it also offers them a new context without significant existing preconceptions for them to examine critically and apply analytically what they have learned in a management class.

References

- Billsberry, J. (2013). From persona non grata to mainstream: The use of film in management teaching as an example of how the discipline of management education is changing. *Journal of Management Education*, 37, 299-304.
- Champoux, J. E. (2001). *Using film to visualize principles and practices*. Cincinnati, OH: Southwestern.
- Cunningham, E. (Producer), & Gordon, S. (Director). (2007). *The King of Kong: A fistful of quarters*. United States: Picturehouse.
- Fee, A., & Budde-Sung, A. E. K. (2014). Using video effectively in diverse classes: What students want. *Journal of Management Education*, 38, 843-874.
- Holbrook, R. L. (2009). OB in a video box: Using *Remember the Titans* as a microcosm for the organizational behavior course. *Journal of Management Education*, 33, 490-513.
- Paglis, L. L. (2013). A review of managerial skills training in the classroom. *Journal of Management Education*, 37, 472-498.
- Smith, G. W. (2009). Using feature films as the primary instructional medium to teach organizational behavior. *Journal of Management Education*, 33, 462-489.
- Taylor, V. F., & Provitera, M. J. (2011). Teaching labor relations with Norma Rae. *Journal of Management Education*, 35, 749-766.
- Tyler, C. L., Anderson, M. H., & Tyler, J. M. (2009). Giving students new eyes: The benefits of having students find media clips to illustrate management concepts. *Journal of Management Education*, 33, 444-461.
- Whetten, D. A., & Cameron, K. S. (2010). *Developing management skills* (8th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.